

Illinois Post-Secondary Transfer Students:
Preliminary Findings from Focus Group Research

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Erika Hunt, Ph.D.
Lisa Hood
Lynne Curry

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Research Summary

In the fall of 2007, the Illinois Board of Higher Education's Shared Data Committee was charged to develop data methods to follow students who transfer across institutions within the Shared Enrollment data system. A Subcommittee on Transfer Credit contracted with researchers at the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University to investigate student transfer. The purpose of this study was to collect exploratory data on the experiences of students as they transfer from one college to another.

Researchers at Illinois State University conducted focus groups and telephone interviews with transfer students at four Illinois institutions of higher education – two in Chicago, and one each in central Illinois and Southern Illinois – at both public and private universities. Students were asked to describe their transfer experiences, including the strengths and weaknesses of the supports available to them from the sending and receiving institutions, and their knowledge and use of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI).

Participating students had transferred from a wide range of institutions dispersed geographically throughout Illinois and some out-of-state institutions. They transferred from community colleges and both public and private four-year institutions. Several, but not all, of these students had earned their Associates Degree prior to transferring to the four-year institutions. Findings from the focus group and telephone interviews are grouped according to these categories: academic advising and other counseling supports; availability of courses, financial aid, and housing; transfer of course credits and application of credits; academic preparation, time-to-degree, and awareness of the Illinois Articulation Initiative.

In general, the quality and usefulness of academic advising varied greatly across both sending and receiving institutions and across colleges and programs within institutions. Students claim to rely heavily on Internet websites and peer networks for important information. Late notification of admission for transfer students seemed to affect financial aid, course availability, and occasionally housing options. Participants attending institutions with specific programs and advisement for transfer students seemed to have smoother transitions, including course credit transfers. Students reported a general lack of awareness about the Illinois Articulation Initiative and the *iTransfer* website.

The results of this study will be used by the Shared Data Committee to assist in developing a more refined and comprehensive system to monitor the transfer of credits in order to target problem areas. A list of "promising practices" and a set of preliminary recommendations is included in this report to start the refinement process.

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Introduction

Many students transfer from one college to another each year, and historically this has created challenges for students striving to attain their higher education goals. To study and monitor student transfer rates and progress, the Illinois Board of Higher Education charged the Shared Data Committee to add elements to the Shared Enrollment System, allowing Illinois agencies to track student movement across colleges and universities. However, the Committee believed that more research was needed regarding student transfer issues. A Subcommittee on Transfer Credit was given responsibility to identify and pursue further research on Illinois student transfers to inform the larger Committee and IBHE on possible additional elements to include in the data tracking system.

In the fall of 2007, the Subcommittee contracted with researchers at the Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University to investigate student transfer. The purpose of this study was to collect exploratory data on the experiences of students as they transfer from one college to another. To do this, researchers at Illinois State University conducted three focus groups and individual telephone interviews with transfer students at four Illinois institutions of higher education – two in Chicago, and one each in central Illinois and Southern Illinois – at both public and private universities¹. In these focus groups and interviews, we asked the students to describe to us their transfer

¹ Focus groups were attempted at two additional institutions – a Chicago based public university and a community college – but because of the time of year poor responses were received and at the community college, the responding students did not meet the criteria for student sample for the study. In the case of the public Chicago-based institution, phone interviews with two students were conducted.

experiences, including the strengths and weaknesses of the supports available to them from the sending and receiving institutions, and their knowledge and use of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). The results of this study will be used by the Shared Data Committee to develop a more refined and comprehensive system to monitor the transfer of credits in order to target problem areas. This report documents the findings from these focus groups and interviews.

Literature Review

Student Transfer Rates and Patterns

In their quest to attain their baccalaureate goals, some students exhibit complex college attendance patterns, transferring from one institution of higher education (IHE) to another. Nationally, nearly 60% of college students attended more than one institution on their way to earning their Bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In 2006 in Illinois, 52,507 students transferred from one IHE to another, with 42% of these students transferring from community colleges to public and private IHEs, 38% transferring from out-of-state or foreign institutions to in-state IHEs, and 11% transferring from public universities to community colleges and other public and private IHEs (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2007).

While student transfer from a community college to a four-year college or university is the most common pattern of attendance, commonly referred to as *vertical transfer*, students' college attendance can be more complex. Other models of transfer that have been identified are *reverse transfer* and *swirling*. Students reverse transfer when they transfer from a four-year IHE to a two-year IHE or community college (Kajstura &

Keim, 1992; Winter & Harris, 1999). Later research on student transfer patterns identified students who “swirl,” transferring to multiple colleges or concurrently enrolling in multiple institutions (Barkley, 1993; McCormick, 2003). Included in this swirling pattern are lateral transfers, students who transfer from a two-year college to another two-year college or from one four-year IHE to another (de los Santos & Wright, 1989). Students also transfer credits via dual credit classes—college credits earned while students are still in high school.

Statewide Articulation Agreements

To help facilitate student transfer without sacrificing credits and extending time-to-degree and college costs, many states have developed statewide systems of articulation over the last 30 years. In the 1970s, several states, including Illinois, began creating initiatives to facilitate credit articulation among their states’ higher education institutions. In 1993, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois Community College Board, and the state’s Transfer Coordinators launched the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). This initiative facilitates student transfer by helping students reach their baccalaureate goals through bringing colleges and universities together, working as equal partners to assure that lower-division baccalaureate courses are comparable in scope, rigor, and quality (Illinois Community College Board, 2005). Currently, 112 IHEs participate in the IAI. The initiative has identified a common core of general education courses—a “package” of courses—that participating institutions recognize as fulfilling their lower-division coursework requirements. The courses transfer from one institution to another as a package, rather than course-to-course articulation. Students can access information about the IAI initiative at the iTransfer website (<http://www.itransfer.org/newwebsite/>),

which describes the types of transfer, the transfer process, and resources available to transfer students. As part of this website, students can link to the Course Applicability System (CAS), providing more specific information about which courses will or will not transfer and how these credits will apply to their degree requirements.

In an evaluation of statewide articulation agreements, Ignash and Townsend (2000) rated Illinois as one of five states having an overall strong state-level articulation system (of 43 responding states). Illinois received this high rating because its system provided for vertical, horizontal, and reverse transfers, included multiple sectors (public, private, independent for-profit and non-profit), encompassed transfer credits for approximately 50% of students at private institutions, and included articulation agreements for general education courses as well as 27 individual program majors. This high rating does not take into account problems that occur in the state related to student transfer.

Problems Associated with Student Transfer

In two studies, Clark (1960, 1980) criticized the community college for its apparent “cooling out” function, sifting out those students who do not have the inclination or aptitude to succeed at the baccalaureate level, lowering their aspirations to vocational pursuits, and making way for those more suited for university work. In the 1960 study, Clark found that community college students’ stated intent to transfer to a four-year college was not being realized; many who intended to transfer did not.

In light of states’ efforts to implement seamless systems of transfer to help students achieve their baccalaureate goals, Anderson, Sun, and Alfonso (2006) conducted a preliminary analysis of statewide articulation agreements to determine whether or not

the system increased the rate of transfer from 2-year to 4-year institutions². These researchers found that statewide articulation agreements had little effect on the probability that students would transfer, especially for minority and low-income students, and students with GEDs. With the limitations of the study in mind, including the timing of the dataset and the infancy of statewide articulation agreements, Anderson, et al. recommended that statewide articulation agreements be developed and implemented within a montage of support services for transfer students. They recommended that these services should include financial aid, academic preparation, and a special focus on targeted support for those students at risk of not pursuing the baccalaureate degree. Therefore, statewide articulation agreements alone are not a panacea, and students who desire to transfer may experience multiple challenges during the transfer process. These problems include loss of credits, prolonged time-to-degree, lack of access to financial aid and housing, and poor academic performance (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). Without supports, these challenges may impede the primary purpose of articulation agreements, which is to provide a system by which students attain their academic goals and receive an efficient and cost-effective education.

Ignash and Townsend (2001) differentiated transfer and articulation in their definitions. According to these researchers, transfer was defined as “student flow among institutions and programs, the ‘who’ involved in transfer;” while articulation is the “movement of students’ academic credits from one point to another, the ‘what’ that is

² At the time of this study, the researchers had access to the Beginning Postsecondary Student Longitudinal Study of 1989-1994 as their most recent data source to estimate statewide articulation agreement effects. Thus, Illinois’ statewide system was not included in this analysis because it was instituted after 1991.

articulated” (Cohen & Brawer, as cited in Ignash & Townsend, p. 174). For this study, we used a broad definition of transfer to include both transfer and articulation.

This study examined the experiences of students as they transferred from one higher education institution to another and the challenges and success of articulating their credits. Therefore, in this report, we subsume both activities under the general term of transfer. The literature review was used to identify pertinent issues and questions for the focus groups and interviews. The following sections of this report describe the methods and findings of this study with concluding recommendations for practice and future research.

Methods

To learn about students’ transfer experiences, we recruited transfer students from four institutions of higher education, with focus group interviews conducted at three of the four institutions. Students were asked to participate in either a 90-minute focus group session or a 30-minute individual telephone interview to answer a series of questions about their transfer experiences. The questions were grouped in the following categories:

- Academic advising and other counseling supports;
- Availability of courses, financial aid, and targeted supports;
- Housing;
- Transfer and application of course credits;
- Affects of student characteristics on the transfer process (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, gender, etc.);
- Academic preparation; and
- Awareness and usefulness of the Illinois Articulation Initiatives “iTransfer” website.

A copy of the focus group/interview script is included in Appendix A. We conducted on-campus focus groups at three institutions and eight telephone interviews with students from three campuses.

Sampling

The four higher education institutions sampled for this study were chosen because they were among the top transfer receiving institutions in Illinois. We also chose this purposive sample to achieve diversity in relation to public and private institutions and geographic location. The institutions constituted three public four-year universities and one private university. Two institutions were located in the Chicago area (hereinafter referred to as “Chicago Public University” and “Chicago Private University”), one was in southern Illinois (“Southern Public University”), and one was in central Illinois (“Central Public University”). We wish to note that the sample does present a limitation on the results of the study, as the researchers found during their interviews that the institutions chosen were deemed to be “transfer friendly” due to their high transfer enrollment rates. Considering this, the findings and recommendations in this report include both effective transfer practices and policies (from which other institutions could learn) as well as gaps that should be strengthened.

To identify and recruit students for the focus groups, we worked with an institutional researcher at each of the four higher education institutions. The institutional researchers were instructed to randomly choose 200 students who had transferred from another college or university in the spring or fall of 2007. The institutional researchers received complete packets with recruitment letters and informed consent forms. The institutional researchers attached mailing labels and mailed the packets to the sample of

transfer students. If students were interested in participating in the focus group on their campus, they returned a response form to the Illinois State University researchers with their contact information and indication of their willingness to participate. In total, 32 transfer students participated in these focus groups and telephone interviews. Table 1 below show how many students were interviewed at each institution.

Table 1

Institution	Students Interviewed	Focus Group	Phone
Southern Public	10	9	1
Central Public	11	11	0
Chicago Private	9	4	5
Chicago Public	2	0	2

A student sample was sought from a Chicago metro area community college. However, the respondents to the recruitment letter did not fit the criteria for the study because they had already earned their Bachelor's degrees. For example, one student respondent, after earning a Bachelor's degree over 20 years ago, was taking a statistics course at the Chicago community college to prepare for graduate school. Another student was taking a science/biology class at the college in order to prepare for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

Characteristics of the participating students

The students in this study transferred from a wide range of institutions dispersed geographically throughout Illinois and some out-of-state institutions. Students transferred from community colleges and both public and private four-year institutions. Out-of-state transfers came from Missouri, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan. Figure 1 below shows

specific “Transfer From” institutions for all study participants.

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Transfer Study Students by “Transfer From” College

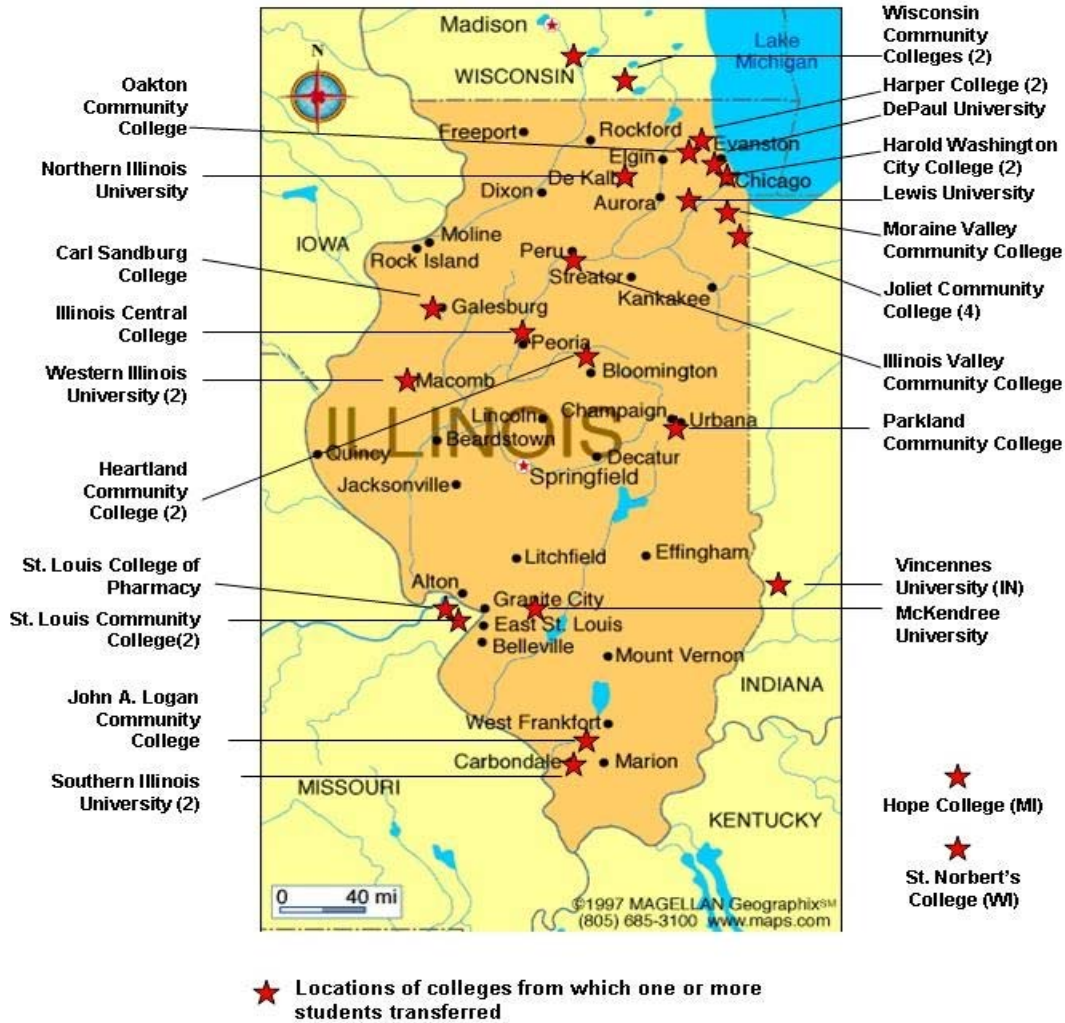


Table 2 shows the race/ethnicity of the transfer students who participated. The student sample was not as diverse as we had hoped, and based on the students’ responses, the

transfer experiences of students did not differ based on race/ethnicity for this population of students.

Table 2. Race/ethnicity of transfer students.

White	Hispanic	African American	Asian
26	1	3	2

Finally, the transfer students exhibited all three transfer patterns identified in the literature: vertical, lateral, and swirling transfers. In this sample, over half (17) of the students students were vertical transfers, moving from a community college to a four-year college/university. Several, but not all, of these students had earned their Associates Degree prior to transferring to the four-year institutions. Others left the community college because they wanted the “college experience” as a residential student rather than a commuter student. Eight of the students were lateral transfers, having left one four-year college/university to attend one of the four participating four-year colleges/universities in this study. Finally, seven students were “swirlers.”

These students had varying patterns of college attendance. Some began at a four-year college and reverse transferred to a community college, and then transferred to another four-year university. Their attendance at the community college was often a “pit stop” in between the four-year institutions to either raise their GPA, save money, or explore career majors. Others began at a community college and then transferred multiple times to successive four-year colleges/universities. Lateral transfer students and swirlers gave very similar explanations for their college attendance patterns. Several of these students left the sending institution because they “had gotten caught up in the college scene” (e.g., college parties) and let their academics suffer. Now, these students were

ready to concentrate on their studies and future academic careers at the receiving institutions. Some enjoyed the game of attending as many institutions as they could and for as long as they can. According to one student, “I’m going to go to school for a long time. My sister went to school for four years and graduated with honors. My brother went to school for 7 ½ years in creative writing. I want to top him.” Other students often complained that they were not a good fit with the sending four-year institutions because of negative experiences with professors, dislike of the community, or a change of major.

Data analysis

The data across focus groups were organized according to the question categories described earlier: availability of courses, financial aid, and housing; transfer of course credits; application of credits; academic advising and other counseling or supports; affects of student characteristics on the transfer process (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, gender, etc.); academic preparation; and awareness and usefulness of the Illinois Articulation Initiative’s “iTransfer” website. The data underwent several analyses, first in the aggregate and then in cross-case comparisons by institutions and institution sector (public and private). To begin, the data were organized categorically; the students’ responses were coded and analyzed thematically using coding and categorization methods outlined by Coffey and Atkinson (1996). The data were reviewed and notes were written on preliminary codes and categories that emerge from the students’ responses. After this initial scan of the data, we reviewed our notes and developed a coding scheme to guide further analysis. The analysis began at a descriptive level, identifying the common characteristics that describe the data within the codes, but then transitioned to more holistic level as we connected themes across questions to provide critical interpretations

of the interdependent issues and challenges students encountered in their transfer experiences. The same analytic strategies were used for the cross-case comparisons to determine if the students from the different institutions had different transfer experiences and to try to explain why these differences might exist.

Findings and Discussion

This section describes our preliminary findings from the focus groups and interviews with Illinois transfer students. The findings are categorized according to the interview questions and are grouped according to these categories: academic advising and other counseling supports; availability of courses, financial aid, and housing; transfer of course credits and application of credits; academic preparation, time-to-degree, and awareness of the Illinois Articulation Initiative.

Academic Advising and Other Counseling Supports

The transfer process seems to be heavily influenced by the quality of advising students receive both prior to transfer and afterwards. This set of findings is presented first because the quality of the advising experience affects the quality of most of the other functions of the transfer experience. Overall, we found inconsistent quality in the advising these students received, regardless of the sending and receiving institutions (2- or 4-year college, public or private).

Many students complained that the advising was impersonal. Often the students had to drive the content and direction of the meetings, and many complained that the advisors did not provide good counseling regarding courses that would transfer and approximate graduation times. As one transfer student put it, the “burden of proof is on

the student to get the courses to transfer to the school”. This was supported by another student who said that, “It’s a lot of work trying to figure out what you need and do not need. This shouldn’t be my job. Isn’t this what they (advisors) are getting paid for?”

Sometimes this inconsistency of advising occurred within one institution but across colleges or majors. According to one student,

Within the geography department, my advisor is amazing. But, in the College of Liberal Arts, I’m just some random guy. So, I would sit in an office with this man, and I was changing from Aviation, which is the College of Applied Science, to Geography, which is the College of Liberal Arts, and this was going to be a totally different game plan for the next two years. And, so this guy was like, “okay, so what do you want to take?” I don’t know. I’m not the person in Liberal Arts, you tell me what I need to take. I had to go back and talk to somebody else, he wasn’t any help at all.

In a comparison of the advising received at the community colleges versus four-year colleges, no distinct pattern emerged. Some students received helpful advising at some community colleges, and poor advising at others. Other students reported positive advising at some four-year colleges and poor advising at others. One student described these comparisons by stating, “In my last semester or two, I would sit down with my one advisor and that’s what I liked about my last college, I had one advisor. She knew where I was going, the classes I had taken, my major, without even looking at it and she knew me on a one-to one basis. Here, I’ve been to the advising office three times and had three different people [advisors]. Two of those people I don’t even want to see again. “

One thing certain was that students felt the advising function was an important support in their college experience. In some institutions, students are assigned one advisor who helps them throughout their tenure at that college. Other institutions offer

advising on a “first come, first served” basis and students see a different advisor each time. If the advisors are not giving the students the information they need about courses or deadlines, they are often left to themselves to learn this information from fellow students or by seeking out or stumbling upon advising resources. According to one student, “At the community college, it was just something I did on my own. I didn’t really see anybody.”

For the most part, the most helpful advising tended to occur when students were assigned to one advisor. The most helpful advising typically came from faculty advisors that were professors in the students’ major. Some majors tended to do a better job at advising their students of upcoming deadlines, courses schedules, degree requirements, and so forth than others. For instance, we found that the College of Business on several campuses provided excellent advising services to their students. These colleges had excellent websites, tailored course catalogs, and faculty advisors that provided all of the necessary information students needed. Another student who was completing a 2 + 2 + 2 degree in automotive technology received excellent advising that started with the program at his high school and continued at his community college and four-year college. In fact, this student had already met with his current faculty advisor when he was still at the community college. This advisor helped him keep track of the courses he needed for the program in order to transfer successfully into the automotive technology program at the four-year college. As a result, all of the courses he took at the community college transferred into the four-year college as intended. We found that these students tended to be the most confident of their college experiences and their ability to succeed and complete their programs with a bachelor’s degree in a timely manner.

Several students complained that the advisors at the receiving institutions were not very helpful until after the students were admitted. After the students decided they were going to transfer and had some colleges in mind, they often sought out advisors at the receiving institutions either during information fairs held at the sending institution or during visits to the receiving institution. According to a student at Central Illinois College,

I never talked with any of my community college counselors when I wanted to transfer, I just talked with (Central Illinois College) counselors. I would email them back and forth, asking them which classes I could transfer in and what I had to do. It seemed to me at (her community college) that you really didn't—you had a different person every time, so they really didn't know anything about you anyway. So, I never even told them I was transferring.

Many complained that, prior to admission, advisors at the receiving institutions either brushed them off or would only give them vague information about which of their courses would transfer and how they would be applied. The advisors would also give only vague information about anticipated graduation times. Without an official transcript, the advisors apparently were hesitant to provide this important information. One student said that an advisor at the four-year university made him feel like he was bothering her by asking these questions. She repeatedly told him that “you should have looked at this website [presumably referring to the IAI or CAS]. It will tell you which courses will transfer and how.” Eventually, she did give him the information he was seeking. Interestingly though, once the students were officially admitted into the institution, these advisors became much more accommodating and helpful.

We found that the Internet is playing an increasingly important role to advising, in many cases. Students are using institutional web sites to garner as much information as they can on their own – in a sense advising themselves. Some universities have

recognized this and developed helpful and informative web sites. However, in many cases it was clear at several institutions that while one advising aspect might be strong, others were not. According to one student, “I think the web is so good here because the advising is so terrible”. This sentiment was reinforced by another student at the same institution who said, “I had to go back to figure out what gen eds (general education courses) I had to take. They didn’t tell me that I could test out of my biology. I tried to go on the web to figure it out because the advisors are horrendous. So, I should’ve tested out of the course but ended up taking it.”

In this study, we found that most institutions did not structure their advisement from the student’s viewpoint, i.e., tracing their advisement processes through the steps of students. One student expressed her frustration with the lack of coordinated services by saying, “I wish they would have informed me of all the different deadlines in one bundle rather than these half-copied, half-hand written letters. It was almost impossible to keep everything straight”. As a result, the transfer process does not go as smoothly as it could, often costing students time and money.

Availability of Courses, Financial Aid, and Targeted Supports

In general, most students did not have problems with enrolling in the courses needed. However, many of the problems related to credit transfer, course enrollments, housing, and financial aid were related to the late notification of their acceptance to the receiving institution. Some of the institutions required full transcripts before accepting a student, which meant that students often did not find out if they were accepted into a college or university until a month before classes started. At this point, this is when

students learned how many of their credits transferred and how. This affected the courses in which they needed to enroll. One student, remarking on his late acceptance, said:

I applied very late as (Chicago Private University) would only admit me if I had 30 hours or more. At the end of summer term, I would have 30 hours, so I had to wait for the summer so I could apply. I applied pretty late and there wasn't much selection of classes then. [To try to prevent applying so late], I took a 4-week summer class at the beginning of the summer because I thought they would release my grades, but they didn't until the end of summer so it didn't matter. So, it was really inconvenient [to get transcripts in order to be officially admitted].

The timing of students' acceptance caused problems in other ways. For some this was an issue, because they were using this information to choose their schools. They had to go by their best guess as to whether or not the receiving institution to which they had given their commitment was truly the institution that transferred most, if not all, of their courses. We heard examples from students of how the course enrollment system was set up at the convenience of the university and not the student. According to one student,

I called and they said since I was a transfer student they wanted me to come in and meet with someone. Since I was going to school and working part-time, I couldn't take a day to drive 4 ½ to 5 hours to get here to sit down and talk with someone and get in the car and drive back. My mom called and complained to somebody and they let me go online and sign up for classes. At first they seemed understanding, but then they would say things like 'some people don't think 4 ½ hours is anything.' But, I don't have the time and money to do that. After I signed up for classes and talked to an advisor, after I moved down here, the first day I moved in I got two letters in my mailbox saying that one of my classes I couldn't be in and so I went to the advising office and they ended up dropping me out of three of my classes. It ended up being a pain because I had been registered since the beginning of the summer and they never said anything to me as far as we're going to drop you out of these classes. And, they were classes that I had already taken a year ago. I didn't get to start classes until the 2nd day of classes. It was a big hassle to return my books and change my schedule.

In this case, the student had an advocate (her mom), who was able to convince the

university to let her register on-line. Other students describe such advocates – whether they were a parent or another university official – who helped them to navigate through the system. One student at Chicago Public University relied on a biology professor for guidance in course selection and scheduling.

Two of the institutions where focus groups were conducted offered specialized orientation events for transfer students and this seemed to make the transition to the receiving institution much easier.

Financial Aid

Most students try to apply for financial aid early in the year when their chances for receiving grants, loans, or scholarships are the best. However, most of the students in this study did not find out if they were accepted into the receiving institution until late summer (July or August). So, many students did not even bother applying for financial aid. According to one student, “I felt like I was too busy to go through the whole financial aid process, filling out the forms, talking to people. I was kind of overwhelmed by the transfer.”

Most of those that did apply either received loans or no aid at all. Only one student said that he received a grant from the receiving institution. Another student said that a scholarship in his program did exist for upper-level students, but these nearly always went to native students because faculty members recommended students for the scholarship. According to him, “As a transfer student, you’re at a disadvantage for the scholarship because the faculty may have only had you for one course, but other students [native students] may have had two or three courses with them”. As transfer students,

they do not have the relationship with the faculty to be recommended for these types of institutional scholarships.

Other students reported scholarships only for students coming in with an Associate's Degree. According to a student at Southern Public University, "I applied here and got a scholarship for academics out of high school. When I transferred in, I asked if that scholarship was still available for me and they said it was only for new students during their first year. Since I was coming in as a transfer student, they said the only scholarships available are for those coming in with an Associates."

Housing

On two of the campuses, specific housing for transfer students did exist as designated transfer floors in one of the college dormitories. The students at Southern Public University seemed to live in this hall with more frequency than on the other campus. As described by a student at Southern Public University, "When you get the welcome pack, there's a whole page that talks about how at (this hall) floors 2 through 7 are for students 21 years and older". It seemed that students were aware of this prior to being admitted to campus. "I heard coming down here, so I already knew it was for older students. It's one of the first buildings to fill up", said another Southern Public University student.

Most of the transfer students were either living at home with their parents or had sought out housing on their own on or near campus. One transfer student at Central Illinois University had spent time on the waiting list for housing because of the timing of his transfer and acceptance. This was a stressful situation for him because of a university

policy requiring students to live on campus for their freshman and sophomore years. As he described,

I transferred in the spring and I was on a wait list for a room and they really weren't sure where I would be living almost up to just a couple days before I was to move in. No one could give me an answer. Well if I don't get a room, where am I going to live? [Because it is a requirement to live on campus for the first two years]. No one would answer that question for me. Eventually it got settled and I got a room. But I was pretty worried the entire time because I thought do I need to get an apartment and it's going to be 20 minutes away. So, I was scared right up until a few days before.

Housing availability did not seem to be an especially important issue to most of these students. Most were satisfied with the availability of housing and their living situations.

Transfer of Course Credits and Application of Credits

On the whole, students were very satisfied with how well their classes transferred from one institution to the other. One student described the curriculum set up at the community college where she transferred, According to her,

(At her community college), they have specific classes that are designed for transfer students. If you know that you're going to transfer, they have the course number designed in a certain way—I think it ends in a zero. You know that it will automatically transfer anywhere in the state. That was helpful because you knew that any classes that you took specifically for your transfer would transfer so you didn't have to waste time taking the wrong classes or figuring out how it would transfer afterwards. I didn't have any problems.

A few students were surprised at how the transferred course credits were applied. For instance, one student at Chicago Public University said that a logic class taken at the community college was counted as an elective rather than satisfying the Philosophy general education requirement. A student at Southern Public University was surprised that his geology courses were counted as general education courses rather than as science courses in his major (geography). According to him, "Geology and Philosophy (Science

and Humanities)...I thought would transfer over as Gen Eds (general education courses), but counted as electives. So, I guess geology isn't a science."

The students who seemed to have the most problem with credits transferring were those that changed majors during or because of the transfer process. At Central Public University, we talked with several students who wanted to major in nursing but could not get into the program and therefore had to choose another major. According to one student,

I transferred in about 106 hours but a lot of them I don't need here because they were nursing based. So a lot of it transferred in but it's just extra credit and it's hurting me now because they've put in a limit for the College of Business and if you're over 70 hours you have to re-apply and get an appeal which is what I'm doing now. It's more of a hassle because I really only have about a year's worth of classes that go toward the business degree. But, you have all credits built up, and right now I'm in a stats class right now because the class I took at (her transferring institution), a math class, wouldn't transfer because it was listed under psychology rather than a math or business program. So, now I'm retaking another class that I really don't need to be retaking. I think they need to figure out a way to get all the colleges statewide and have all the classes set up in the exact same way. So, that when you do transfer, it's a lot easier and you know that this will transfer or this won't instead of all the crazy IAI stuff and this won't transfer because it's off by a little bit. It's a hassle for the student.

Another student who transferred to Central Public University from another public four-year college intended to transfer again because she couldn't get into her major at Central Public University. According to her,

My credits transferred but I came in to be a nursing student, but they're sending me through a lot of stuff now. So, I think I'm going to go somewhere else. I didn't really have a problem at first getting into any of my classes. But now, this semester I had a problem and its going to set me back. I'm not going to waste money taking all these classes that I don't need.

Other courses that did not transfer were typically developmental courses, but students did not expect these courses to transfer, so were not surprised or disappointed when they did not. "The ones (classes) that didn't were 2 remedial math courses—below

100 level courses that I had to take before I could take college level. Those didn't transfer and I knew they wouldn't transfer", commented one student.

A few students reported problems with meeting the receiving institutions' prerequisite requirements when it seemed that the students should be exempt. One student at the northern private university said that at the community college he had tested out of English 101 and earned a passing grade in English 102. Instead of being able to enroll in the third level (e.g., English 103) at the receiving institution, he was required to go back and take the English 101 course. He probably could have tested out of that course, but no advisors or other administrators informed him of that option. At Southern Public University, one student was a pharmacy student at her sending institution but she had changed her major to accounting after transferring to the receiving institution. As a prerequisite for her accounting course she was required to re-take a calculus course. She remarked that this was "now my third time taking calculus—once as an AP high school course, and then at the School of Pharmacology, and now at [southern public university]." The university would not accept the other courses to serve as the prerequisite for her accounting course.

In the dialogues with students, they often talked about how it was common knowledge that private institutions seem much more willing to accept transfer credits versus public universities. One student said that it was easier to get a private to accept credits from a public or private institution than it was for a public institution to accept credits from private institutions. According to him, "I think coming from state to private—the credits transfer pretty easily. I talked to some people who transferred out [private to public] and they had some problems."

Students at Chicago Private University were excited when they found out that after they transferred to this university, their GPA calculations started over. For those who had partaken of the “college experience” a little too much and were looking for a renewed focus on academics, this was a welcomed practice.

Those students that seemed to experience the most problems with transferring credits were students transferring from out-of-state institutions. Of the 32 students interviewed, seven students transferred from nearby states. Most of these were students who did not have the Associate’s Degree yet. One student had been pharmacy major, and few of her credits transferred. Another student transferred from a Michigan four-year college to an Illinois community college and then on to Central Public University. She said she had some difficulty getting some of her credits to transfer and ended up changing her major so that she could graduate relatively on-time. (She had a brief hiatus before enrolling in the community college.) Conversely, another student transferred from a well-rated community college in Missouri, and he had no problem in transferring credits to the four-year university.

As stated earlier in this report, the institutions in this study were perceived by students as ‘transfer friendly institutions,’ and this may have accounted for better experiences with the transfer of course credits. Several students commented on how they had preferred to go to another university in Illinois, but that 60 hours were required to transfer in and they had less than 60 hours. The institutions in this study were willing to accept transfer students at all levels of the transfer process.

Academic Preparation

Students' academic preparation results were mixed. Some students who transferred from a community college said that coursework there was easy. One student said, "a community college is high school with ashtrays." Other students who attended community colleges – especially ones with strong reputations – felt that they were well-prepared and guided. One student who went to a community college right out of high school for a year and then transferred reported that, "it gave me confidence academically because I wasn't a great student in high school." Some students who reported difficulty said that it was only in certain courses that were typically unique to the university, such as a Foundations of Inquiry class. They also reported problems with classes that were writing-intensive or relied on group discussion. These were courses with which students did not have much experience, but once they became acclimated to the class formats, they performed well. For other courses, students said, "nothing could prepare you for it." These were typically the universities' most rigorous courses (e.g., sciences, aviation), but the students recognized that with hard work they could achieve. They felt confident that they could succeed in any of their courses.

Time to Degree

Most students recognized that it was their fault that they would not graduate on time. Many students had "stopped out" between transfers, taking a half or full year off between colleges. Also, this student sample exhibited quite a bit of changing majors. The changes in majors were sometimes the primary reason for the transfers. In other words, students transferred to another school because the sending school did not offer the student's desired major, or the receiving institution had a higher quality program in the desired major. We also found that students decided to change their majors after

transferring to another college because they would lose credits, thus increasing their time-to-degree, or they became interested in another career option. These changes often resulted in loss of credits, or credits going toward electives rather than toward major degree requirements.

It was not clear why this group had so many changes in majors and whether this is a general characteristic of transfer students. For the most part, students remained within the same cluster of majors (e.g., changing from business to marketing or agriculture to agriculture business). Usually, these students found out that the admittance criteria or degree requirements were more stringent or would require more time to graduate, so they changed their major to one less rigorous and demanding. Some relegated their previous major to a minor. For instance, one student was a public relations major with a minor in German at her previous colleges, but due to credit losses, she chose to flip German to her major with a marketing minor. With this change, she is satisfied that she will graduate in another year. One student was quite proud of his swirler status. He started his college career as a General Education student (undeclared major) and now, after his second transfer, he is a psychology student. However, he announced that his brother had just graduated from college after close to ten years, and he was ready to outdo him. He expected another transfer within another year.

Awareness and Usefulness of the Illinois Articulation Initiative “iTransfer” Website

In general, there was a lack of awareness of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). Some students noticed IAI next to their courses on their transcript but did not know what this meant. In the focus group interview at Central Public University, 6 of 11 students in the focus group were aware of the IAI web site. These eleven students had

transferred from seven different institutions – six different community colleges and one four year public university – so this high level of knowledge regarding the IAI was encouraging.

However, in the Southern Public University focus group, only one student knew of the IAI or its web site. According to him, “I heard about it when I was doing my own academic advising at my other community college. I stumbled across it, not the website though, but the organization. They label the courses as IAI approved. Those were the only courses I took. So, I said in here, they took everything and they couldn’t turn any of them away.”

Four of the 9 students interviewed from Chicago Private University were aware of the IAI. A few of them remember advisors talking about such a system, but not actually naming it or providing the information the students needed to be able to access the iTransfer website. One student watched the advisor enter his courses into the system to determine whether or not the university would accept them, and the advisor repeatedly told this student that he should have consulted this information before he came to see her. However, she never told him the name of the site or where he could find it.

For those that had used the IAI web site, they found it extremely helpful. According to one community college transfer student aware of the IAI, “I’m part of that IAI and that was probably the best thing that the state’s ever done. Because there were no questions asked. My Associates was transferred over and I didn’t really have to worry about anything.” However, one student did recommend that the state “provide more official information [about the site]. It would make you feel more secure. Right now it says that colleges could change this information, so you’re hoping for the best.” For those

who did not know about the IAI, when told that such a system existed, the students said that this information would have been very helpful in their transfer experiences. One student suggested to “advertise it [the web site]. Send a representative to [a Chicago community college] because they are not publicizing this at all. The advisors aren’t.”

Limitations of the Study

The generalizability of findings from this study is limited due to the scope and time allotted for this project. First, we sampled students from only four higher education institutions. While we were careful to select institutions from different geographic locations across the state, there may be some institutions in other areas of the state that have other unique issues or effective strategies around student transfer. Second, institutions chosen for this study had the highest enrollments of transfer students and were viewed as “transfer-friendly” institutions. Therefore, we may not have captured the full range of issues and complications that might arise in the transfer process. However, if these are the “transfer friendly” institutions and they have their challenges and limitations as described above, then we can be confident in saying that the less transfer-friendly institutions probably share similar problems. Third, out of the approximately 50,000 students who transferred in 2006 (and presumably around the same number in 2007), we talked with 32 transfer students. The sample size was small partially due to time constraints in which it was not possible to pursue additional recruiting methods after the initial mailings. Where we lacked in broad coverage, we strived to capture the depth and breadth of students’ stories about their transfer experiences. We were able to ascertain that these students had transferred from a wide variety of sending institutions, both in and outside of Illinois. Therefore, while this sample is not a representative sample of

statewide institutions and students, we are confident in our findings as we heard very common stories from these students regardless of where they transferred from and where they are now.

Promising Practices

As we mentioned in the Methods section, the selected institutions were not only recipients of many transfer students, but also considered to be “transfer-friendly.” We did gather data from the students that highlight positive student transfer practices that they encountered at both their sending and receiving institutions, which seem to be worthy of consideration by other institutions. These include the following:

- Assigning each transfer student to one advisor who gets to know their students’ aspirations and academic needs;
- Recruit faculty as academic advisors to students in their majors;
- Analyze and design/redesign college and departmental websites to include useful information from the students’ viewpoints;
- Send advisors from recipient institutions to meet with incoming transfer students from sending institutions prior to the actual transfer;
- Identify advocates that can help transfer students navigate procedures at their receiving institutions;
- Offer specialized orientation events and materials specifically designed for transfer students;
- At the sending institution, clearly designate courses that are IAI approved and that will transfer to the receiving institution.
- Establish designated housing options for transfer students.

There are likely many more supportive practices for transfer students that are operating on Illinois campuses. Further research would create more thorough descriptive information regarding such practices.

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study are summarized below under each of the research categories:

Academic advising and other counseling supports

- Data showed an overall inconsistency in the quality of advising for transfer students, both at the sending and receiving institutions.
- Advising was often impersonal and conducted on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Students often had to find deadlines, course requirements, and other key information on their own, often through institutional websites and peers.
- The most helpful advising occurred when students were assigned to one advisor.
- Students felt that partially because of inadequate advising, the transfer process did not go as smoothly as it could have, and often cost students time and money.

Availability of courses, financial aid, and targeted supports

- Many problems that students encountered with course transfers, course enrollment and financial aid were related to late notification of their acceptance to the receiving institution.
- Students felt that course enrollment systems at their receiving institutions were set up at the convenience of the university and not the student.
- Specialized orientation events and information packets for transfer students seemed to make the transition to the receiving institution much easier.

Housing

- On two campuses, special housing options for transfer students existed as designated dormitory floors.
- Most students in the sample either lived at home with family or sought out housing on their own, on or near campus.
- Most students were satisfied with the availability of housing and their current living situations.

Transfer and application of course credits

- Overall, students were satisfied with how well their classes transferred from one institution to the other.
- A few students were surprised at how the transferred course credits were applied (e.g., as electives rather than general education required courses).

- Students with the most problems transferring credits were those that changed majors during or because of the transfer process, and those transferring from out-of-state institutions.
- A few students encountered problems at the receiving institution with having to take prerequisite courses for which it seems they should have been exempt.

Academic preparation and time to degree

- Students' academic preparation was mixed, depending on the rigor of the sending institution.
- Students reported some difficulties with courses unique to the receiving institution and courses that relied heavily on writing and/or group discussion. However, once they became acclimated to class formats, they generally performed well.
- Most of the participating students recognized that it was their fault that they would not graduate on time. Some had taken time off between transfers, and others had changed majors.

Awareness and usefulness of the Illinois Articulation Initiative's "iTransfer" website.

- Students reported a general lack of awareness about the Illinois Articulation Initiative and the iTransfer website.
- A few students remembered an advisor either talking about or using the system, but not actually naming it or providing the information students needed to access it on their own.

Recommendations

With the limitations of the study in mind, we hesitate to make sweeping generalizations from the results. However, we do believe that because we heard similar themes across college sites and across students that these data can be informative to transfer coordinators and both state and institutional policymakers. The following are our recommendations from this study:

For Institutions:

1. **Evaluate transfer student advisement practices and establish advising capacity customized for transfer students.** A large number of students in this study indicated that advisement at the receiving institution was inadequate to meet their needs. Students seemed to prefer having an assigned advisor rather than meeting advisors on a walk-in basis. Such assignments could be further customized by major and career focus.

2. **Establish other customized services for transfer students.** Having specific dormitories, floors or other specific housing options for older and transfer students seemed to be a popular option among the students interviewed. Sending departmental representatives to community colleges to walk prospective transfer students through the application and transfer process was a service students appreciated. Specific websites and information packets for transfer students would make keeping track of important information easier. Scheduling services and activities throughout the academic year would assure that transfer students make a full and productive adjustment to the institution.
3. **Streamline credit transfers at the receiving institution.** Many students felt that the burden for proving transferable credits had been placed on them, despite assurances from both the transferring and receiving institutions about course acceptance. One institution made the credit transfer process easy by providing students with “contracts” during their transfer orientation sessions, showing which courses transferred. These contracts were signed by a university administrator.
4. **Evaluate prerequisite requirements for transfer students.** If the receiving institution accepts higher level courses for transfer credit, consider the time and cost to students of having to go back and take lower level prerequisites.

For the State of Illinois:

1. **Launch a statewide campaign to promote knowledge and understanding of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) and the Course Applicability System (CAS).** Although the IAI has existed for 14 years, a large number of students in this study were unaware of it. When it was explained to them, they universally agreed that it would have been helpful in selecting and tracking courses prior to and during their transfer process. Those few students who did use the IAI listings had very smooth transfer experiences. The Illinois Board of Higher Education and the Illinois Community College Board can launch an effective marketing campaign targeted to students, parents and academic advisors.
2. **Establish a resource database of promising practices in transfer student support.** Target audiences would include all community college transfer programs, transfer coordinators in Illinois IHEs, and academic advisors and student service personnel in receiving institutions. Include promising transfer practice articles and presentations in appropriate journals and conference programs.

Recommendations for Further Research

While the sample for this study provided the opportunity for an initial exploratory study, the researchers recommend that further research be conducted to delve deeper into the topic.

- 1) We recommend that further focus group interviews be conducted on campuses with lower student transfer enrollments, which we hypothesize are seen as less

- “transfer friendly”. A similar set of questions should be asked to assess and compare the experiences of students who transfer to institutions with less transfer-oriented services.
- 2) Interviews should be conducted with admissions personnel and major advisors at both community colleges and four-year colleges in the state. Researchers should assess their knowledge of the student transfer process, the challenges that they face, and the strategies they use to help students navigate the transfer process.
 - 3) We recommend that this study be replicated on a larger scale and a longer timeline. Using this study as a pilot, researchers could expand on the themes that we have highlighted and explore the issues in greater depth with a larger sample of students and colleges.
 - 4) Specifically investigate “promising practices” in transfer student support on multiple campuses.
 - 5) Specifically study transfer students in regard to their changing of majors: frequency, whether specific majors are involved, and effects of major changing for transfer students.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Protocol

Transfer Study Focus Group Script

Good morning/afternoon and welcome to our session. Thank you for coming. My name is [name of facilitator here] and I am a researcher from Illinois State University. With me is [name of partner] who is also working on this project.

As was indicated in the phone call and letter you received, the Illinois Board of Higher Education has initiated a study of the factors that influence students' transfer decisions and experiences. This research will inform higher education institutions and policymakers as they review policies and processes to improve students' abilities to reach their higher education goals. As part of that process we want to gather input from transfer students such as you. We are specifically interested in learning about your experiences in transferring credits from one higher education institution to another and how this has impacted your success in working toward a degree in your major. Equally important is to assess the types of support you have received to help you in your transfer to this institution.

We are conducting more focus groups like this at other higher education institutions around the state. As you probably know you were chosen for this study because your transcript at this college/university shows that you have transferred credit from another college or university. You were selected from a list of transfer students at this school.

Before we begin, let me remind you of a few items. First, since this is a focus group there are no right or wrong answers but different experiences and different points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said and please feel free to react or respond to what others are saying. You also do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. Second, we're recording this session so we get what you say right. This means we should talk one at a time so the tape is not garbled. If at any time you would like us to turn off the tape, please let us know and we will do so. Third, we will be on a first name basis today, but in the report we write up from the focus groups, there will not be any names listed or attached to comments that may be used so you may be assured of complete confidentiality. And we are interested in your candid comments.

Finally, our session will last about an hour and a half and we will not be taking a formal break. The rest rooms are [give location] and refreshments are on the back table. Feel free to leave the table for any of these but please come back as soon as possible. Does anyone have any questions at this point?

Let's begin. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names, but let's get to know each other a little better. Tell us who you are, what your major is, if you have one, and if you transferred here from a community college, a private college/university, or a public college/university. (*Note to facilitators—note this for analysis of responses.*)

1. Let's begin. First, please go around the room and tell me first, why you chose to be a student who transferred and second, when you transferred to this school, giving me the year and whether it was in spring or fall? (In fall or spring of what year) *Note: to*

facilitator—if you have students who transferred at different times in the year—have the fall group answer these questions first—then have the spring group answer—might also have a summer group as well. This allows comparative analysis.

- Were you able to enroll in all of the courses you wanted, or did you have to wait for any to open up or wait for the next semester?
 - Did you have access to financial aid when you transferred?
 - Were you able to find housing when you transferred?
2. Now, how many credits did you attempt to transfer and how many were accepted?
- How were these credits applied to your degree requirements? Counted toward prerequisites? Required courses? Electives?
 - Were you surprised about how some of your credits did or did not transfer?
 - Did you encounter any problems when you tried to transfer your credits? If so, can you describe them? How did you resolve these issues?
 - When did you learn that your credits would not be counted? What problems did this cause for you?
 - Did any of you earn dual credits when you were in high school? Did these credits transfer?
3. Have any of you transferred multiple times to other schools?
- What influenced you to make these multiple transfers?
 - Have you had any issues with transferring credits as you have moved from school to school?
 - Do you expect to graduate on time? If not, do you think that your multiple transfers may be one cause?

4. Have all of you chosen a major? If so, when did you choose it—before or after you transferred to this school? Before or after you achieved junior standing (60+ hours)?
 - How did your choice of major influence your credit transfers? Do you think that more or less of your credits were accepted because of your major?
 - For those of you who did not declare a major at the time of transfer, how did this affect your transfer experience?
 - What information did you use to choose your major?
 - Did your choice of major impact the courses you took prior to transfer or how your credit transferred?
5. Before you transferred to this school and then after you transferred, what kinds of advising or academic counseling did you seek related to your transfer?
 - Did you receive the information you needed to help you transfer?
 - What kinds of information do you wish you would have received?
 - Did you receive the information you needed to help you academically?
6. Did you receive any other additional counseling or support from this school after you transferred, such as a special orientation for transfer students, mentoring by faculty or fellow students, pamphlets or brochures, or others?
 - How helpful were these supports?
 - What additional support could this school have provided that would have helped you adjust to this school?
7. Do you believe that certain characteristics affected your transfer and success at this school, for example, your race/ethnicity, gender, age, first-generation college student, English is your second language, family or work responsibilities, financial aid eligibility, etc.)?

- Please explain.
8. When you enrolled in this school as a transfer student, did you feel academically prepared to succeed in your courses?
- Are there any courses in which you felt more or less prepared?
 - Do you expect to graduate on time?
9. This is the last set of questions for you, and then we will be through. I am not sure if you are aware of this or not, but more than 100 colleges and universities in Illinois participate in the Illinois Articulation Initiative which is a statewide transfer agreement in which these schools have agreed to accept a package of general education courses. To provide information on this initiative, the state hosts a website called “iTransfer” that provides information and recommendations to students who want to transfer credits between schools. This website also includes the Course Applicability System that gives students information about whether or not their courses will transfer to another college.
- Are any of you aware of this website?
 - Did any of you use this website when you were choosing where to transfer?
 - Did this website provide you with the information you needed to successfully transfer your credits? Was the information accurate?
 - If the website did not meet your needs, how could the website do a better job?

That was the last of our questions. In closing we want to note again that the purpose of these discussion groups is to develop a better understanding of transfer students’ experiences in order to learn how Illinois colleges and policymakers can improve their policies and processes to improve the transfer process for students like you. Is there anything we should have talked about but didn’t? Here is my business card with my contact information. If you have any concerns about this discussion or want to provide additional information, please feel free to contact us.

Thank you for your time, and good luck with your classes!